
GREAT PLAINS TRAIL NEWSLETTER

Welcome to the Great Plains Trail

Welcome to the very first issue of the Great Plains Trail Alliance Newsletter! This issue comes at a very exciting time for GPTA. First of all, 2018 marks the 50th anniversary of the signing of the National Trails System Act by President Lyndon B. Johnson on October 2, 1968. It's also been a busy year for GPTA board members as we traveled to Kearney, Nebraska to participate in the Plains Safaris Symposium put on by the University of Nebraska's Center for Great Plains Studies in April. In May, we received some national press in the form of an excellent article by author Ken Ilgunas in the June 2018 issue of Backpacker Magazine entitled, "Walking to the Horizon." As summer kicks into gear, we're



Great Plains Trail Board of directors: From left to right: Luke Jordan, Steve Myers, Kevin Purdy, Bob Pahre, Drew Smith (not pictured)

looking forward to working with Oglala National Grassland in Nebraska to add new miles of trail near Toadstool Geologic Park.

Yes, 2018 appears to be a big year for GPTA and we'd like to thank everyone who has helped us along the way, and we're excited to create this newsletter to share our successes and our ideas as we look to establish the GPT as a viable long distance trail through the heart of the scenic and historic Great Plains!

- Steve Myers

Great Plains Multi-Use Trail

Although it is too early to say for certain what types of trail users will be allowed on the entire length of the Great Plains Trail, it looks like the GPT could be one of the more inclusive and user-friendly long-distance trails in America. The current long-distance trails are fairly limited when it comes to the types of users. The Appalachian Trail, for instance, only allows hikers on the full length of its route. A couple of the other big-name trails also allow mountain bikes for a portion of their route, but very few destination trails allow hikers, bicyclists and equestrians on the entire length of their trails.

The Great Plains Trail may end up being the exception when it comes to an inclusive trail experience. The current plans include routes for hikers/backpackers, bicyclists and equestrians on the trail. Due to local regulations in special areas such as wilderness areas and national parks, the Great Plains Trail may require some alternate routes in certain localities, but hopefully these will be limited to (relatively) short sections of the trail. One example of a potential alternate routing situation is in South Dakota where users will have the option of taking either the Mickelson Trail route or the Centennial Trail route, depending on their means of conveyance. Bicyclists will be able to utilize the Mickelson Trail while hikers can explore the Centennial Trail.

These are some of the decisions that will be made by the Great Plains Trail Alliance in future Board of Director meetings, but the current plan is to design a trail that allows for a wide variety of trail users. Stay tuned for further discussions about developing an inclusive and diverse trail on the Great Plains of America.

- Kevin Purdy



Lone hiker on a Nebraska section of the Great Plains Trail

Don't forget to support GPTA every time you make a purchase from Amazon. Just log in to smile.amazon.com using your usual Amazon login, and select Great Plains Trail Alliance as the organization you want to support. Then you start shopping as normal. It doesn't cost you anything and the AmazonSmile Foundation will donate to GPTA 0.5% of every dollar you spend! Sweet!

Place is a powerful thing

After hearing a number of presenters at the 2018 Plains Safaris Conference in Kearney, Nebraska, it's clear to me that if you grew up on the Great Plains, or experienced them at a formative time in your life, they will stick with you forever. You can no more get rid of them than you can get rid of your favorite band, or your favorite baseball team, or the memories of driving a car for the first time.

Experience and love go hand in hand. You can't love a place you haven't experienced, and you can't really experience a place you don't love.

Sometimes the experience comes first, and sometimes the love comes first.

For those people that grew up on the Great Plains, the love was always there, and as they grew older, they looked for ways to experience it in a deeper way. I was particularly struck by the epic adventure of Michael Forsberg and his friend who decided to walk, bike, or paddle the entire length of the Platte River watershed from Wyoming to the Nebraska/Iowa border. I love that kind of adventure because it begins with just the love of the river. From there, it was only natural for them to look for a way to experience the river in the fullest way possible. Oh sure, it was also about "scientific research," that's how they were able to get the time and make it pay, but they weren't fooling anyone. The trip was about the love of a place. Their expedition won't make it to National Geographic or Outside Magazine. It won't generate millions of Youtube hits, or large sums of money from sponsorships, but that's not the point. It's just a way to look at a river and be able to say, "I know you."



For others, myself included, the experience came first, and I grew to love a place because I'd been there, stopped there, stayed there, took a good hard look, and dropped a little blood and sweat along the way. I realized the place is worthy of respect, worthy of praise, and worthy of further exploration. I see the Great Plains Trail as a path to experiencing a place, and if that experience leads to someone loving the place, the Great Plains will become even greater.

- Steve Myers

Planning Your GPT Thru-hike

Most people are familiar with the Triple Crown of long-distance hiking here in America. The Appalachian, Pacific Crest and Continental Divide Trails attract thousands of hikers every year, from simple day hikes to a several-month long thru-hike of the entire route. These trails have been in existence for several decades and are only the big three in a much longer list of premier hiking adventures. The Great Plains Trail is set to be one of these premier trails.

So, how does one successfully tackle a thru-hike of the Great Plains Trail? The short answer is it all comes down to good thorough planning. Unlike many other long trails where there is a campsite or shelter every 8-12 miles and the trail association or federal agency owns the majority of the land, that is simply not true for the Great Plains Trail. Long gaps with no designated camping is the first big challenge of a successful thru-hike. Knowing where the established camping areas and units of public land are along the route and planning your nights accordingly is crucial. Even more crucial is planning for those longer gaps where there is simply nothing there, only long roadwalks under a big sky across mostly private land. There are a few spots along the GPT where vehicle support from a friend is absolutely necessary if you are traveling by foot. Specifically in New Mexico, the large gap between Roswell and Clayton requires coordinated assistance. This is about two weeks' worth of hiking. Other areas under this category are nowhere near as extensive, but still require assistance of some kind:



- Between the communities of Fowler and Calhan, Colorado

- Between the communities of Kimball and Scottsbluff in Nebraska

- Between the community of Newell and the Slim Buttes unit of the Custer National Forest in South Dakota

The camping situation ties directly into challenge #2, finances. Some of the lodging options in certain areas are limited to motels in small towns. Budgeting the right amount of cash for those necessary hotel stays is another crucial aspect of planning a thru-hike of the Great Plains. The occasional motel stay is a necessity. Researching the options available in the communities the trail passes through is important, as there is no guidebook available to share that information. The lodging and camping options will be updated on the GPTA website as the route changes and more lodging options are developed.

Another major challenge with the Great Plains Trail is the current lack of official markings along most sections. Many of the roads are not actually labeled on the ground, but only on maps. Having a form of digital navigation is a handy tool to ensure you are staying on track. A downloaded kml file of the route on a phone or GPS unit will help keep travelers on-trail in those tricky spots. The established off-road sections also are not identified as the Great Plains Trail in any official way. This is something the GPTA Board of Directors will be tackling in the near future, obtaining permission to mark the designated off-road segments by using trail markers or blazes. You can find a previous article about blazing on the Great Plains Trail website or Facebook page.

Maps do exist for some of the off-road portions of the Great Plains Trail. These can be purchased mostly from the US Forest Service map store or the National Geographic Store. The following maps cover existing portions of the Great Plains Trail:

National Geographic Trails Illustrated Maps

- Guadalupe Mountains National Park (TX)
- Black Hills North (SD)
- Black Hills South (SD)
- Theodore Roosevelt National Park (ND)

US Forest Service Map Store:

- Lincoln National Forest: Guadalupe Ranger District (NM)
- Kiowa & Rita Blanca National Grasslands (NM/TX/OK)
- Comanche National Grassland (CO)
- Pawnee National Grassland (CO)
- Nebraska National Forest & Oglala National Grassland: Pine Ridge Ranger District (NE)
- Buffalo Gap National Grassland (SD)
- Custer National Forest: Sioux Ranger District (SD/MT)
- Little Missouri National Grassland (ND)



A spring hike on Capulin Volcano in New Mexico

A few other things to take into consideration:

The Great Plains is a dry environment, so making sure you have enough water is a concern. Carrying more than you think you could possibly need is a good idea. Given the large distance between communities and some river/stream crossings, it is recommended that a water-cache system be considered when planning a long distance hike on the GPT.

Tying into the dry environment is the amount of exposure to the elements. Always be aware of weather patterns for the coming week while you are out trekking. Given the amount of exposure and the heat in the summer, it is strongly recommended that a thru-hike be undertaken during the Spring or Fall seasons. A spring northbound hike starting in the south or a fall southbound hike starting in the north are the recommended time-frames for a long journey on the Great Plains Trail.



The Montana route option of the planned trail is questionable at this time. A closer analysis of the routing options in Montana must be conducted before any decision is made on where the official northern terminus of the GPT will be. For this reason, it is not recommended to hike the Montana portion as a thru-hike (unless you have vehicle support for the entire route). For now, the northern terminus is in North Dakota.

The best resource for information about attempting a long hike on the Great Plains Trail is the volunteer Board of Directors who care for it. Reach out to one of us if you are planning a long hike on the GPT, we can provide you with more in-depth information. We will do our best to answer your questions and provide any assistance or support we can offer. For a list of other tips, suggestions or disclaimers, visit the Great Plains Trail Alliance’s website.

- Luke Jordan

Not Like The Others



Our vision for the Great Plains Trail is to create a new hiking route that crosses the country from Mexico to Canada. When completed, the GPT will be ready to take its place with the Pacific Crest and Continental Divide Trails, making a similar north-south traverse across the nation.

There will be differences, of course. The first and most obvious is found in the names: “Crest” and “Divide” vs “Plains”. The differences in topography are baked in from the start. The PCT and CDT have a few stretches of gentle terrain, but mostly they are a series of climbs - up and down ridges, through saddles and passes, along deep valleys and canyons. There is plenty of rugged terrain along the GPT, and even a few mountains, but most of the walking is through open country.

And much of that open country is farm and ranch country. The high country along the Crest and Divide is mostly unsuited for settlement. Farms and towns are scarce. Although there is a good deal of grazing and lumbering and mining, little of this land was claimed for private ownership. Some 90% of the PCT, and somewhat less of the CDT, is routed on public lands - mostly National Forests and Parks, BLM land, and some state and local parks. Getting permission to hike - and crucially, to camp - on these lands was not much of a problem. The promoters and builders of the PCT and CDT mostly had to interface with just a few public lands agencies.

The proportions of public and private lands on the GPT route are just about the inverse of those other trails. Most of the land is in private hands and is settled, albeit rather sparsely. Even where the lands are nominally public, as with BLM and State Trust lands, they are often leased out to ranchers on a long-term basis and are not open to public entry.

This difference in land ownership dictates an entirely different approach to developing the trail. Hiking the GPT will not be a wilderness experience, it will be a rural experience. People live and work all along the trail. They own the land. Enlisting their cooperation and support - not that of government bureaucrats - is essential to the success of the GPT.

Developing the GPT is a big enterprise. Like any big enterprise, it's best to start small, see what works and what doesn't and keep applying those lessons.

Our overall strategy is to identify a relatively small "core" section of the trail and work to make it a premium hiking experience. Mostly this means mapping out a route in great detail, identifying resources, and connecting with local communities. Once we are successful in the core region, we can expand steadily outward, lengthening the trail year by year.

We have identified the 300 mile stretch from Scottsbluff, NE to Bear Butte SD as our core section. Our goal for 2018 is to produce a detailed map and data book, available on our web site, that will enable hikers from all over the world to enjoy the beautiful Sand Hills and Black Hills country of the core trail.



We hope that GPT communities will see the trail as an asset, and become places where hikers can find not only supplies and places to stay, but personal connections as well. Luke (Strider) Jordan encountered a wealth of hospitality and kindness in his 2016 thru-hike, and we want stories like his to be part and parcel of the GPT experience.

The GPT is bound to be a different kind of hiking experience from the other long-distance trails, and that's good. Your donations and support will go a long way to bringing people together in this unique landscape.

- Drew Smith

Making Trail

Have you ever wondered how to build a trail? Not surprisingly, it depends on the purpose and the terrain. Members of the Great Plains Trail Alliance learned more about this when we joined the Poudre Wilderness Volunteers and some US Forest Service employees to build a new stretch of the Pawnee Buttes Trail in Pawnee National Grassland, Colorado.

A lot of Pawnee NG use happens on “unofficial” trails. These tend to duplicate each other and increase impact on the prairie. The USFS built a new trailhead to concentrate parking and picnicking in one place, and to concentrate impact. However, the trailhead needed a connector trail to the Pawnee Buttes Trail to focus the impact. Because most GPTA members live along Colorado’s Front Range, this was a good place to start our trail-building efforts, and to demonstrate to land managers that we were an effective partners.

While they were at it, the USFS decided to build an accessible trail to a viewpoint looking at First and Second Pawnee Buttes. The trail to the buttes loops around a butte and up and down a couple gullies. Because the trail up to the top of the buttes can’t be accessible for wheelchairs, a flat and wide side trail that provides wheelchair access to a viewpoint also made good sense.



Across a fairly flat grassland, the trail strategy was simple: first, flag a route. Then, dump a cubic yard of gravel every five yards on the connector trail. We dumped about double that amount on the accessible trail. This was enough gravel for a three-foot-wide trail for wheelchairs, two-foot wide for foot traffic. It turned out to be too much gravel, so both trails are a bit wider than intended.

The USFS used a Bobcat to deliver the gravel before we got there. Our job was to spread it out, with shovels, rakes, and Mcleods. After you pile the gravel it 3-5 inches high, you’re ready to compress it with two plate compressors. The result was a flat trail, about 1-2 inches deep.

Pretty simple, really. We were at it for a little over five hours, and the compressors stayed longer finishing the job. We had a short, hard rainstorm in mid afternoon, and were rewarded with a double full rainbow. The GPTA contingent then hiked to the buttes and back. After that, I turned around for the 925-mile trip back to Champaign.

Some links for the newsletter. You should have access to my photos; if not, let me know.

GPTA: <http://www.greatplainstrail.org/>

GPTA Blog: <http://greatplainstrail.wordpress.com/>

GPTA Flickr Page: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/gpta/>

Bob’s photos of Pawnee National Grassland: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/rpahre/sets/72157633157222507/>

- Robert Pahre